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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000192

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DEPARTMENT FOR M, NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, OBO, AND DS
NSC FOR SHAPIRO
PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [ETRD](#) [ETTC](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: FELTMAN-SHAPIRO MARCH 7 DISCUSSIONS WITH SYRIAN FM
MUALLIM ON EMBASSY OPERATIONS, SANCTIONS, AND THE MURAD
CHILD ABDUCTION CASE

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

11. (S/NF) Acting NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Near and Near Africa Dan Shapiro met Syrian FM Muallim on March 7 and urged him to help normalize operations for the U.S. Embassy in Damascus and the Syrian Embassy in Washington. In particular, they pressed Muallim to facilitate U.S. efforts to acquire land and build a new U.S. Embassy in Damascus, permit the re-opening of the American Language Center and the Cultural Affairs Center, and expand access of Embassy officers to the Syrian government (SARG). In addition, Feltman asked for the SARG's assistance in helping to favorably resolve the long-standing Murad child abduction case. Muallim agreed to look at these issues and asked for U.S. assistance in obtaining export licenses for maintenance on two Airbus aircraft engines. Feltman and Shapiro agreed to look into this matter. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) Acting NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Near East and North Africa Dan Shapiro met for three-and-a-half hours on March 7 with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, Vice FM Faisal Miqdad, and Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban. Feltman's delegation was accompanied by Charge and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker.) Feltman and Shapiro's central message was that the U.S. administration was pursuing sustained and principled engagement with Syria and other countries as a matter of policy. The President and Secretary did not view engagement as a reward, but rather as a tool for achieving concrete objectives. This cable reports on the parts of the discussion that dealt with U.S. Embassy operations, sanctions, and the Murad abduction case. It should be read in conjunction with septels on discussions regarding Arab-Israeli comprehensive peace issues, Palestinian issues, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon.

New Embassy Compound

13. (S/NF) Feltman said we viewed Syria's cooperation in the pursuit of a NEC as an important step in shaping a new relationship. Muallim said he was ready to support the issuance of visas to a State team to evaluate new locations, but the Syrian regime's ability to assist would depend on where the U.S. wanted to build. Feltman said his visit to the embassy revealed the poor and unsafe conditions in which U.S. employees operated and his goal was to see this situation remedied. Muallim agreed to consider our requests.

Normal Embassy operations

14. (S/NF) Feltman argued that both the U.S. Embassy in Syria and the Syrian Embassy in Washington had borne the brunt of the poor bilateral relations between the two countries. He argued that the resumption of dialogue provided an impetus to establish normal relations between both capitals and their respective embassies. Muallim agreed and said he would so long as Ambassador Moustafa received reciprocal treatment in Washington. He welcomed the Charge to make contacts with his Chief of Staff and with Vice Minister Miqdad's office.

American Language Center

15. (S/NF) Feltman observed that the Syrian government's decision to order the closure of the American Cultural Affairs Center and American Language Center had dealt a blow to the U.S. Embassy's ability to reach out to Syrians. The closure of the ALC in particular had come at the expense of the many Syrian students who were studying there. Feltman pressed Muallim to agree to the re-opening of the ALC as soon as possible; staffing, financial, and other administrative issues would make it impossible to re-open the ALC unless the Embassy acted soon. Muallim agreed to convey this message but said that the Syrian government also would be looking for

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gestures from Washington. (Note: Embassy Damascus submitted a dipnote to the MFA on March 12 announcing its intention to re-open the ALC on May 1.)

Safety of Flight Maintenance Waivers

16. (S/NF) In that regard, Muallim thanked the USG for issuing licenses to refurbish its two Boeing 747s permitted under the Syria Accountability Act. Now, he continued, Syria needed help in getting licenses for Lufthansa to perform maintenance on two Airbus plane engines. Feltman and Shapiro reaffirmed the administration's desire not to use safety of flight technology as a lever on the Syrian government. They promised to look into the Airbus engine licenses, and Charge asked Muallim to direct any specific inquiries on other licensing issues to the Embassy's Commercial officer. (Note: We understand A A/S Feltman updated Syrian Ambassador Imad Moustafa on March 11; Embassy Damascus also plans to follow up with the Syrian MFA.)

Murad Case

17. (S/NF) Feltman raised the Murad child abduction case, saying it was one of personal interest that he had dealt with as Ambassador to Lebanon and in his current position. The two Murad children had been abducted by their father in violation of a U.S. Court order. A Lebanese court had subsequently affirmed the U.S. Court order awarding Mrs. Murad custody of the two children. The U.S. now believed the children were in Syria. Feltman said we would be grateful for the assistance of the Syrian government in helping to return the children to their mother. Muallim asked whether the children were Amcits and/or Lebanese citizens. Feltman replied they were born in the U.S. but may have received Lebanese citizenship through their father. Muallim claimed this was the first time he was hearing about the case and asked for more information. Charge said the Embassy would provide the necessary background. (Note:

Embassy Damascus is following up with the MFA. Consular records show that the Embassy has raised the Murad case with FM Muallim on at least two previous occasions.)

18. (SBU) Acting NEA A/S Feltman and NSC NENA Senior Director Shapiro cleared on this cable.

CONNELLY